



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE THEORY OF REFERENCE WORK

By W. W. BISHOP, *Superintendent of the Reading Room, Library of Congress*

One of the commonest phenomena in the growth of a language is the unconscious development of technical phrases. Words which have a plain and ordinary meaning, universally understood and used, are given a special turn or a peculiar import in some locality or in some occupation. In a highly developed form of civilization in which communication is rapid and intercourse constant such special and peculiar meanings spread quickly and become current before people are aware either of the fact or the process. Every calling and profession has its own jargon, perfectly intelligible to the initiate, though but half understood by the rest of the world. And in a singularly democratic country, one in which governmental decrees fixing nomenclature are practically unknown (for the reason that the central government has no concern with local matters) the jargon of a trade or a profession may become fixed without any particular attention from anyone. Coined words, as the verbs "to accession," "to shelf-list," are in all conscience bad enough, but chief of the startling and novel crop of new phrases in our calling is the term "reference librarian."

To the curious I commend the task of tracing in the library press and in library reports the history of this designation. It would make a good subject for a seminar paper. But whatever its history, the term has arrived. It meets me in half a dozen letters a day. I find persons signing themselves "reference librarian" writing from colleges and universities, from public libraries, from endowed research libraries, from state and governmental libraries. These libraries are large and small, general and special, but they all have a person styled a "reference librarian," and in their reports we will find paragraphs on "reference" work, "reference" books, "reference"

rooms, and so on. But a study of the functions performed by these persons and in these departments leave me with the impression that the terms are used rather loosely, that the duties performed by "reference workers" are by no means the same in all libraries. Observation also leads me to believe that the term covers functions ranging from the practical control of all the relations with the public (in certain non-circulating libraries) down to the mere task of keeping order in a college study room. Before beginning any discussion of reference work, then, there is need, even among librarians, for a certain amount of definition.

Reference work, as defined in this paper, is the service rendered by a librarian *in aid* of some sort of study. It is not the study itself—that is done by the reader. Reference work is ordinarily distinguished from circulation work in libraries, although reference work may, and often does, lead to the sort of circulation librarians profess an ardent desire to further. The help given to a reader engaged in research of any sort is what we mean by reference work. It may be aid of the most trivial sort, as in the finding of a name in a city directory, or of the most elaborate character, as the preparation of extensive lists of references such as those printed by the Division of Bibliography in the Library of Congress, or by the New York Public Library. But it is primarily help given to a reader, not performance of the reader's task. Reference work, then, is in aid of research, but it is not research itself.

"Reference" librarians, it should follow are employees assigned to the task of assisting readers in the prosecution of their studies. They are the interpreters of the library to the public. The books are here on the shelves; the machinery of library operation (catalogs, files, and what not)

is ready; here are readers, each with his own need. But without some one to help a little, to explain, to suggest, to direct, the right book, the right article does not always fall into the reader's hands. The expert and the tyro alike bring their difficulties to the man who can help them with his knowledge—not of the topic, but of the machinery. He does not, he can not, be an expert in many and various fields. But he does know books and library methods. He can refer people to the right place in the catalog, the proper section of the shelves; he is able to solve baffling puzzles in the way of abbreviated or incomplete titles, and he knows more than a little of what books his library owns. He is the interpreter of the library to readers, revealing not that which he himself has created, but that which has been gathered, arranged, listed, labeled, and shelved against their needs. The reference librarian has always existed. It is only of recent years that division of labor has given him a name—without his knowledge or consent, as for the most part names are wont to be bestowed.

"Reference books," too, have taken on a new and dubious meaning. Formerly the term was restricted to works of an encyclopædic character, to books of ready reference. Dictionaries, almanacs, catalogs, cyclopædias, compendia, were reference books. Now (in libraries) to these have been added all other books placed in reading rooms with the view of keeping them there for the convenience of readers. Reference books we generally hold to mean books in the reference rooms, or reading rooms, which are not ordinarily subject to circulation. Other books to which the old definition applies and which may not be in the reference rooms still receive the old designation. Bayle's Dictionary, for example, would doubtless be considered a reference book even by the ruthless modernist who consigns it to the stack and never revels in the spicy anecdotes, the keen thrusts of its heretical author. I find also (not among librarians) a disposition to term "reference" books *any* books to

which reference is made in syllabi and reading lists. Time and again I have seen letters asking about "reference" books, which proved to be very ordinary and commonplace text-books, or monographs. To librarians, however, the term doubtless conveys its old meaning of compends for quick consultation and has come to include also such other books as experience has placed at the convenience of reference workers and readers in reading rooms.

The modern extension of this word reference is further seen in the phrases "reference rooms" and "reference library." These are set over against circulation departments and lending libraries. As a rule, it is the smaller libraries which use the term "reference room," or "reference department." The larger libraries, which subdivide their work in aid of readers, are more likely to use the term "reading rooms," particularly as they probably have half a dozen departments for specialized aid of research. A technical reading and study room, for instance, is not ordinarily referred to as a "reference room," but as a "department of technology." "Reference libraries" are a group apart. Their function is primarily the aid of specialized, of advanced research. Considering the great number of libraries and the money spent on them in America, the group is a very small one as yet, but as notable as it is small. There is moreover, small question as to the meaning of the word when applied to them. Reference in their case spells research.

Whether or no these definitions find common acceptance, there can be no question as to one fact which confronts anyone planning reference work for any particular library. Most of our libraries are open twelve to fourteen hours daily, and for a short period on Sunday. The average library employee is not present more than eight hours a day. Obviously this means, save in very small libraries, a certain duplication of force and division of labor in the reference work. This at once implies a certain amount of organization and planning in its conduct. The mere as-

signment of a probably suitable person to the reference desk is of course not enough. There must be some continuity in the work, some assurance that the man coming at night will get as good service as the man who came in the morning. In other words reference work demands a policy on the part of the librarian, a definite plan as to what is expected from it, and the means to be applied toward it. Even if it has grown up of itself after its own fashion, the very success it has achieved requires a careful analysis and a plan for continuation. We have given great attention to buying books, to cataloging and classifying them, to building up circulation, to bringing the books home to the people, to providing buildings. The reference work demands the same sort of care and thought.

Another very obvious fact is that no one person can possibly have special knowledge of the wide variety of subjects on which libraries have books. It is almost inevitable that, even in a library of moderate size, some one else than the reference librarian may be the best person to assist a particular inquirer. In a large library in which specialists are necessarily gathered, it is highly probable that the special department, or the specialist in some department, rather than the reference librarian, should attend to his need. The reader "is entitled to the best aid in the library's staff." Thus on any theory of reference work, the reference librarian is bound by a self-denying ordinance. Not his service merely, but the best service, he is to put at the reader's disposal. He is to be a guide not alone to the books, but to the library's resources in personnel. This principle also pre-supposes a policy on the part of the library as a whole toward the reference work.

That policy will differ according to the nature of the demands made upon the library and the extent of its resources. There are, speaking very broadly, three sorts of demands in ordinary reference work, the inquiry for historico-literary information of every sort, the inquiry about

present-day conditions in social and economic fields, and the inquiry in special fields of knowledge, such as technical chemistry or electricity, or law. The historic (or antiquarian) demand is the most familiar and probably the most frequent in large libraries; the social (contemporary) demand is the most insistent and difficult to satisfy; the technical demand (when serious) is usually made in a technical library, or by a person already trained who is capable of handling for himself the technical books. Now the general library is usually either strong in history, literature and the arts, or strong in statistics, documents, and sociology. It is seldom so evenly developed (for whatever reason—many will occur to you at once) in all fields that none has a preponderance. The equipment and training of the reference workers should, it would seem, reflect the strongest side of the library's collections, at least up to the point where those collections require the services of specialists. For example, suppose a library has a good collection of music which is growing rapidly as a result of an endowment. Ultimately it will need a specialist in musical literature in charge of the collection. Until the time comes for him, however, it would be folly not to have some one on the reference staff—or at least available for reference work—who knows more than a little of music and its literature.

But if the reference librarian is not to absorb inquiries at the reference desk, if he is properly to consider himself an introducer of readers to the person best able to assist them, he is also required by this very obligation to sift inquiries, to discover those, for instance, which can be answered by means of the *World's Almanac*, or *Who's Who*, and to prevent them going past him to bother and annoy busy folk. We have at the Library of Congress a department of Semitics. But we have learned in the Reading Room to spot the young Egyptians and Syrians who wish to read the files of our one Arabic illustrated magazine, and not to let them get past the

Reading Room desk to the Semitic Department. If the question can be handled with reasonable ease and celerity by the reference force, it should remain with them. Tact, the ability to single out the actual thing wanted in the haze of the first questions, a good memory, knowledge of catalogs and of classifications, are the prime requisites in a "reference" librarian. Added to them must be—as indicated above—an acquaintance with some field in which the library is particularly strong, and in which there is a persistent demand. Experience, too, counts for more in reference work than almost any other factor, particularly experience in the library in which the work is done. Time and again I have seen reference workers made wise by long years of training handle with consummate ease and success an inquiry which had baffled inexperienced folk of excellent, even superior, training. The acquaintance with the library's resources, which comes from living in it, the knowledge of how similar questions were met before, the curious ability to sense the real point at issue, are assets which come with time alone.

We shall not attempt in this paper to take up the practical matters of *how* such reference librarians shall perform their manifold and varied duties. The topic is the *theory* of reference work, which involves of course the attitude of the library toward it, and the qualifications of those engaged in it, as well as the preliminary discussion of its nature. But the tools of the reference worker and his quarters we may properly include within the theory of his work. Whether the force be large or small, whether the work be general or special, the reference librarian must have some special place to work in and some things to work with. (I have seen both fundamentals totally ignored.)

To begin with his tools. In a general sense the entire reference collection is for his use in aiding readers, but it is the books and apparatus which he uses personally with great frequency that more immediately concern us. These should be

near at hand where they can be reached with little motion. No matter what his particular line of work, there are sure to develop lists and bibliographies, memoranda and notes. Some sort of record is naturally kept of particularly difficult and puzzling inquiries. He will need a vertical file for all these, and if the demand is for ephemeral publications on questions of the hour and the place is strong, his vertical file is likely to grow to large dimensions. He will need as many works of quick reference as he can get about him, dictionaries, indexes, compends of statistics, recent bibliographies, directories, and so on. These are his first aids, his emergency tools.

His next line of help is not so often the general collection of reference books as it is the catalog of the library. If that instrument is at all well made, it is the natural resort of the reference librarian in almost all his emergencies. He probably will know it more thoroughly than anyone except the filers. It would seem almost a necessity that he should not be placed far from it, and yet we have all seen reference rooms remote from the public catalog, even on separate floors.

Then come the reference books in the reference room, open to readers freely, and distinctly for their use, but in a peculiar sense also the tools of the reference librarian. Reference collections should be made with local ends in view. While one may with safety and wisdom foresee a demand and provide reference books for it, the bulk of the reference books should be such as experience shows to be needed in that particular place. Because a book is very useful in some large library, it is by no means certain that it will prove an equally valuable reference aid in a small town library or in a special library. Reference collections, moreover, should contain a certain number of duplicates. Experience will show what they shall be. My plea is that the reference collection should be made up strictly in accordance with local needs, guided by the reference librarian's observations and his knowledge

of the demand. It goes without saying that it will require constant and drastic revision.

Such are the tools of the trade. How should they be housed? No details can be given, but certain principles may be at least mentioned. The reference room must be near the public catalog; it must not be remote from the book stacks. There should be (even in small libraries) some provision for privacy of consultation when necessary. It is extremely difficult to have no place to take an embarrassed inquirer, no place to consult on what may be very important matters other than the open reference room. Some study rooms where groups can work adjacent to the main reference room seem also a necessity. Debaters and clubs we are likely to have with us for some time to come. Further details are matters of the individual building.

Assuming, then, that we are agreed that reference work is organized effort on the part of libraries in aid of the most expeditious and fruitful use of their books, under comfortable housing conditions, we may safely inquire whether its possibilities have been explored, its limits reached. Have we yet done all that can be done properly to exploit the books in our libraries, to develop their use to the utmost? Is it not true that we are but beginning to see the possibilities of useful service which can be rendered to the community, not alone by the existence of rich collections, of carefully selected libraries, but by the trained and organized force which interprets them? Is it not imperative that we abandon (if we have ever held) the passive attitude, politely responsive to demands, but creating none? Consider for a moment the attitude of the so-called "special" library toward its clients. Because of their high intelligence in some special field, of their keen interest in the literature of their calling, the clients of such a library demand and secure high-grade service within that field, a service which generally sets itself no limits of time or effort on behalf of its readers.

Zeal in such a library does not degenerate into officiousness, nor does proper reserve become indifference. The librarians of a scientific laboratory, of an insurance company, of a research institute know their limited clientele, anticipate their wants, respond to their calls, serve intelligently, and therefore successfully.

Even so, general libraries may perhaps establish a relation of intimacy with at least certain sections or classes of their larger community. By a study of its component parts, of its social organization, there have already been found in many cities possibilities of helpful aid to many classes of readers who ordinarily came but seldom to any library. Such a study of a town or city one supposes every librarian makes in a general way. But the reference workers in large and small public libraries are under special obligation to consider not only those daily demands which custom and training bring to their desks, but all those latent chances of usefulness which lie too frequently undreamt of about them. Why buy certain classes of books? Why keep other classes? Who can use this sort, and who that? Why not develop a certain subject for a certain need, even if it be hitherto unvoiced? Why not spend on the study of the possible and actual use of books some of the energy shown in selecting fiction and reading reviews? In other words, why not exploit intelligently and successfully the non-recreative side of library work, building up stores of books against a future need, gathering ephemeral material for the day?

The possibilities of reference work in reference libraries are, I believe, but dimly seen as yet. Judging from our foremost examples, one might say that the keynote is specialization, either by way of departments within a general library, as the New York Public Library, or by limiting the field of the library itself, as in the John Crerar Library, or the John Carter Brown Library. But specialization means planning for the student, the investigator, fully as much as for the librarian assigned to the care of a department. It means a

policy of acquisition in special fields, a development of a special clientele, a specialized service which can create a demand as well as supply one. The mere library specialist, who sits in a room and gathers books about him, performs a service of a certain sort, it is true. But the specialist in American history, in prints, in maps, in music, in physics, in law, in statistics, who keeps in touch with the men of his sort throughout the world, who knows them, knows what is going on, contributes his mite, brings them eagerly about him, fills a vastly more important post. We have men of this sort, and we shall have more of them as our libraries grow. They are alive. They are the true reference workers, whatever their official nomenclature.

And the general "reference librarian," the man who is compelled to be all things to all men, who, counting nothing and no one trivial, spends his days opening up to the miscellaneous public the stores of the library's books, what of him? He sends the interesting inquiry on to the specialist; he passes on the interesting

man to another head of department; he greets generations of students in high schools, colleges, normal schools, technical schools; he helps out the hurried newspaper man hunting desperately for a portrait or a biography of some one sprung into fame between editions; he sets the aspiring Daughter of the American Revolution on the track of a new bar; here he averts a difficulty, there he smooths down an irate reader with too often a just grievance; he is an interpreter, revealing to inquirers what the library has; he is a lubricant, making the wheels run noiselessly and well. Little glory and less reputation accrue to him. He counts his days' work done well, but sees no tally of so many thousand books bought or other thousands cataloged. At his best scholars use him, like him, thank him. At his lowest ebb no one considers him save as a useful part of the machinery. This is the theory of his work—service, quiet, self-effacing, but not passive or unheeding. To make books useful, and more used,—this is his aim. This aim and this theory are alike honored in any gathering of librarians.

## PIONEERING IN UTAH

By MARY ELIZABETH DOWNEY, *Library Secretary and Organizer of Utah*

After listening to all the wonderful things that are being done in mature library work all over our country, on this fine program, which has been so ably prepared for us, it may be well to come back to first principles for a few minutes and listen to some of the things that are being done in one of our new States. Provincialism is, I presume, one of the most interesting subjects which any of us can pursue. Any of us who travel across the continent from time to time, or who go abroad, or who are working in the various states, no doubt have a very interesting fund of stories to relate.

When I went to Utah more than a year ago I soon found my preconceived notions

of the state undergoing a change, and that to have any real success there I must work with the people and use the agencies which the gods had already placed there.

The thing that will be of interest to you, is, perhaps, the methods of work which are as different from the east and middlewest, as conditions are different, and I presume whatever is found to work successfully in Utah, may safely be said to be of special value to all these inter-mountain states from Canada to Mexico, and from the Mississippi Valley to the Coast states, where conditions and people are much the same.

One of the greatest aids to promoting library work over the state is the pulpit of the Mormon church, which is open for the